

****ATTENTION****

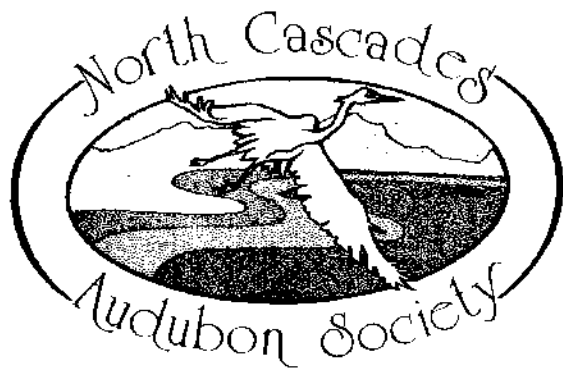
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Report any harrassment
of Bald Eagles to the
Washington State
Department of Game.

1-800-562-5626

BALD EAGLES OF THE NOOKSACK



P. O. Box 5805
Bellingham, WA 98227

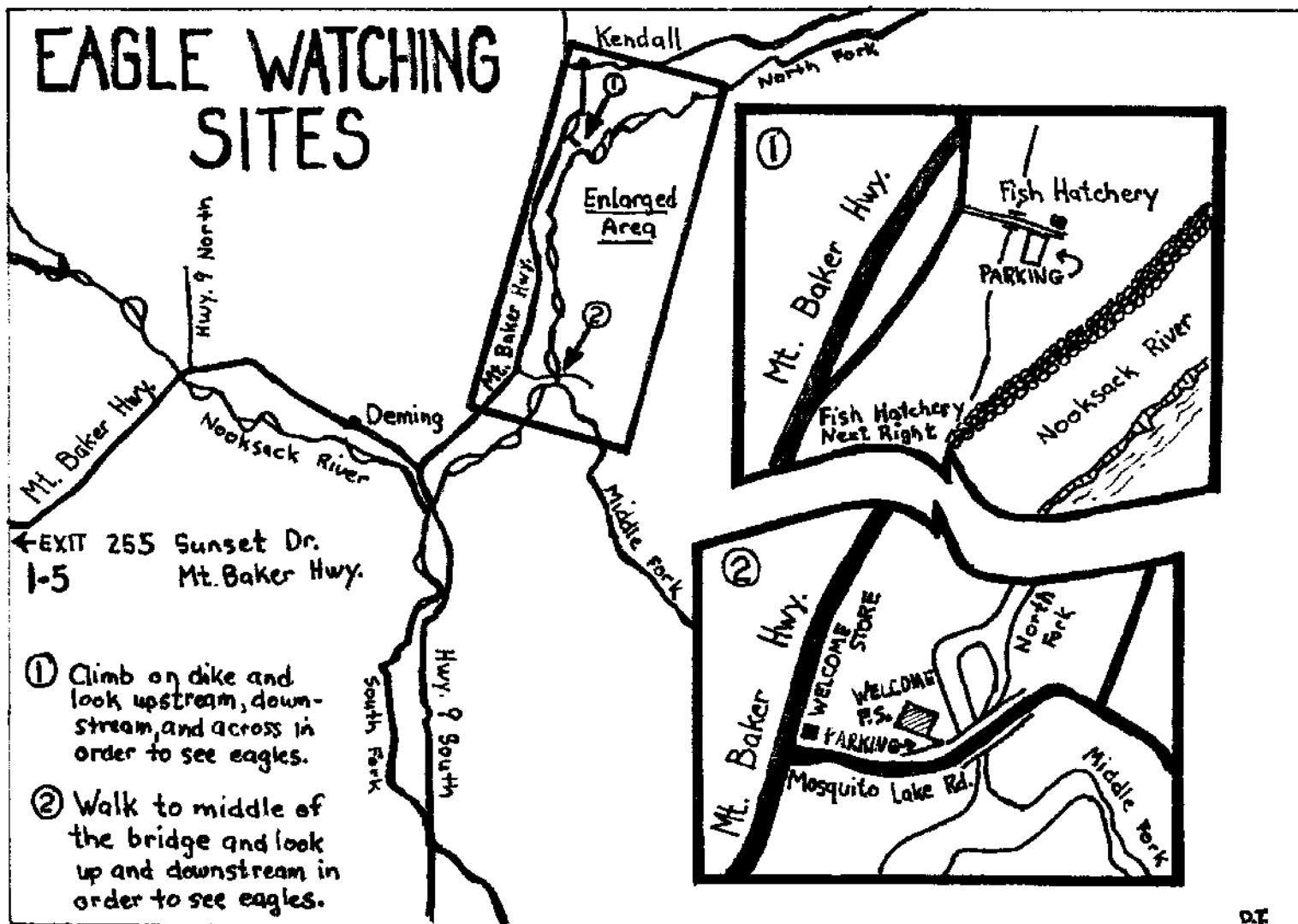
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EAGLE WATCHING SITES

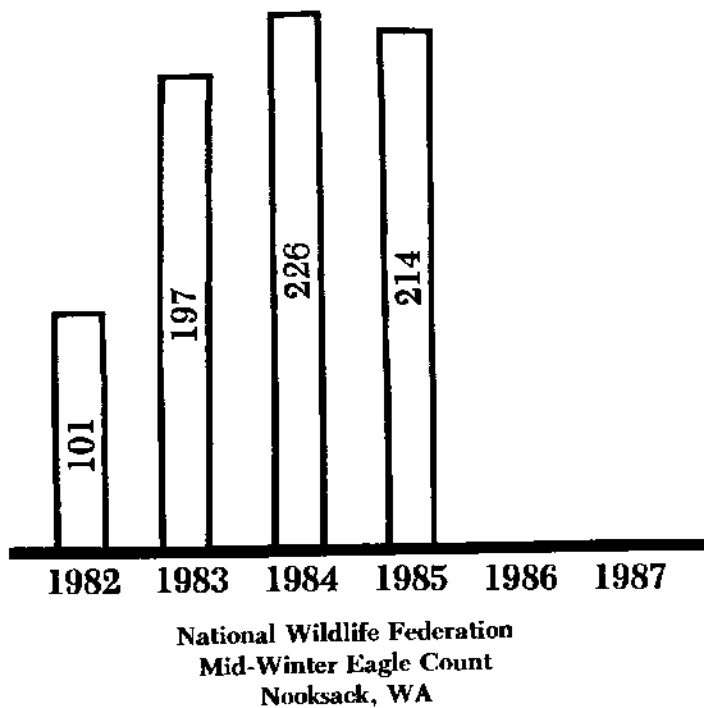


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Washington is the winter home for approximately 1500 Bald Eagles. The majority of these birds spend the cloudy, rainy winter days along the rivers and marine shores of western Washington. It is there that spawned out salmon are washed by winter floods onto open gravel bars where the Bald Eagle can freely feed. As they perch in the cottonwoods near the bars their black body, white head and tail provide a stark contrast to the drab winter landscape. In them nature provides an inspiring and majestic touch.

THE RIVER

The Nooksack drains 600 square miles on the west flank of Mt. Baker. The three main tributaries, north, middle, and south fork merge near Deming and flow in a north-westerly arc toward Bellingham Bay. The upper reaches flow through vast mountain forests while the lower reaches weave through lowland forests and diked agricultural lands. It is characteristic of the river to rise and fall rapidly as the relatively small basin responds to the inundation of winter storms from the Pacific Ocean.



THE EAGLES

Population: Bald Eagles begin arriving in the Nooksack Valley in late September. The population is generally less than 30 individuals until December when there is a rapid increase, which paralleling the chum run peaks in mid-January at about 150 and drops to almost zero by March.

In the latest count, 163 eagles of the 214 total were concentrated from the north and middle fork junction to Kendall, the same area where the chum salmon spawned in greatest numbers. The eagle distribution is obviously related to the high number of salmon carcasses on which they feed. It is noteworthy that Nooksack population has exceeded the more popularly known Skagit population in several of the last eight winter eagle counts.

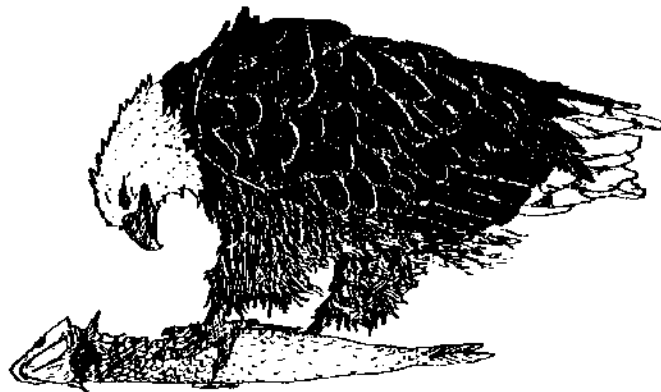
HUMAN DISRUPTION

There is little doubt that man's activities affect the wintering eagles. A night roost has been logged; fishermen and boaters frequent the waters, disturbing the feeding birds; river erosion control projects, such as

"rocking" have been conducted during the eagle's winter stay. While the logging and rocking were singular events conducted before we appreciated their impact, it is clear that government agencies responsible for permits and work activity in the north fork area need to understand the eagle's winter ecology and provide for their protection. Recreational use of the river by fishermen, boaters, birdwatchers, and the increasing number of off-road vehicles, poses a larger problem for the eagles. The eagles are very sensitive to disturbance on the feeding bars. Studies of feeding birds indicate wariness and flight when human approach is less than 1/4 mile. While the birds do become accustomed to some human intrusion, constant disruption may affect the birds' caloric intake. The impact of this disruption is unknown. Studies do, however, indicate the eagles prefer areas with the least human disturbance.

THE FISH

The Nooksack, its back channels and sloughs are the spawning grounds for 5 species of salmon. The winter chum run which peaks in mid-January is the mainstay of the Bald Eagle diet. The primary spawning ground for the chum is from the junction of the north and middle fork to Kendall. The chum, having laid their eggs in the river gravel, remain to protect the Redd (or egg site) for up to 2 weeks before they die. Then their spawned out carcasses litter the shallow riffles and bars. With rising water the carcasses are moved downstream and as the water recedes they are left along the shore. Those left on the open bars are preferred by the eagles.





DAYTIME HABITS

After early morning feeding along the river banks, the eagles fly to nearby perch trees. It is not unusual to see 15 or 20 birds in a single black cottonwood. The birds much prefer this perch tree species which is tall, near the river, offering strong upper branches and foliage free visibility. The eagles will also perch in big leaf maple, snags, red alder, and the tops of conifers. The presence of suitable perch trees is critical because of the eagles will spend about 85% of the short winter days there. Occasionally the eagles take advantage of sunny periods to spread their wings and warm themselves. Most often, however, the birds are quiet sentinels, ever watchful of the river environs. Unless disturbed they will remain perched for long periods. In late afternoon they will resume active feeding.

NIGHT HABITS

As dusk approaches the eagles leave the river. Then they can often be seen flying high overhead. They are preparing to enter the night roosts. About half the time they congregate in stage trees which are located between the river and night roost. It is believed that this behavior provides newcomers to the river information about night roost locations. From the stage trees the birds enter the night roost. The night roost must meet special habitat requirements. Usually located on steep slopes the 8 roosts identified so far in the valley all provide wide visibility, wind protection, availability of stage trees and lack of human disturbance. Old-growth conifers are uniformly preferred by the eagles. Several roosts host up to 35 birds, most, however, contain 5 to 10 birds. The specific requirements of the roost sites make them rare habitats. Seven of the eight known sites are on state land managed by the Department of Natural Resources. Year after year the eagles return to these same roosts.

OBSERVING EAGLES

Two locations along the north fork of the Nooksack offer excellent viewing of wintering eagles. They are the Welcome Bridge and the Kendall Hatchery. **Welcome Bridge** is located off the Mt. Baker Highway approximately 18 miles from Bellingham. Turn right on the Mosquito Lake Road and travel ¼ mile to the bridge. Parking is available at the fire station on the east side of the bridge. The best viewing is from the middle of the bridge looking up the river. Check the river bar and cottonwoods for birds.

Kendall Hatchery is located off the Mt. Baker Highway approximately 24 miles from Bellingham. Follow the signs to the state salmon hatchery, parking is provided. Many birds congregate on the bars south of the hatchery and in the roost trees north of the hatchery and along the dike behind the hatchery.

Mid-January is unquestionably the finest time to observe the eagles. Feeding is frequently observed in the early morning or late afternoon. Expect to see the birds perching during the mid-day.



MINIMIZE DISTURBANCE — use binoculars or a spotting scope for your observations. Stay on the roadways and established human areas. The birds will most often accommodate patient observers with close fly overs, aerial antics and feeding without being disturbed.